

Telephone interview with Dr. Paul Jackson, physician in Vietnam. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 7 April 1999, 27 April 1999.

I want to get a little background on you first. You grew up in Louisiana?

Yes. I was born in Centerville, MS, May 4th, 1940. My dad was a general practitioner in a little town called, Liberty, MS. He had been in practice for about 10 years when World War II broke out. He joined up. In those days there wasn't a whole lot of specialty training, but he was good with his hands and at that time he would have been . . . He was born in 1905, so in '41 he would have been 35 when the war started.

So, they sent him . . . it was a kind of a strange thing... We traveled all around to the different army bases. I so little I couldn't remember in the beginning. They sent him onto Greenville Army Air Base in Greenville, MS. From there they sent him up to Chicago and trained him with trauma surgery and then sent him to England right before the invasion. He just followed the Normandy invasion into Europe and was one of the surgeons. They set up a big hospital at Liege and they were surrounded during the Battle of the Bulge. He's got a lot of stories. Well, he's dead now. One of his stories was when they were surrounded and it was looking pretty bleak, the colonel, the head of the hospital said, they'd just draw straws to see who will leave with the patients, because some of these patients had to be moved. They just voted for none of them to even vote, they were just going to all stay. So, they stayed and the next few days the skies cleared and the Battle of the Bulge was over.

That's where he was. Then after World War II with his surgery training . . . My mother's first cousin had a little clinic in Clinton, LA, which is just below Liberty, MS. He went there and so we moved to Louisiana, and that's how we got there.

I went through my whole schooling, grammar school, and high school in Clinton. And then through the Presbyterian Church appropriated school in Memphis. It was Southwestern then, it's Rhodes College now. I went to college there and got a biology degree. The med school was right there in Memphis so I just right ahead and went to med school in Memphis.

As soon as I graduated from medical school I interned at Charity in New Orleans under the LSU service. Well, that was '66. From January '66 to January '67 was my internship and that was the year Vietnam was really . . . I guess we had a half a million men over there at the latter part of '66. I had a first cousin that had joined the Navy and I liked the uniforms and liked the sea. I didn't even think of the Marine Corps. I never saw the sea or the uniforms. They said, "Well, doc you're in the Navy now; you're going to be with the Marines in Vietnam."

I checked back in my letters. After I joined in the latter part of December of '66. I just walked down Canal Street and raised my right hand and joined. But from my last official day as an intern which was January 3, 1967, and I arrived in Vietnam in my command post in Vietnam on February 3, 1967.

Good night, that was the quickest thing I've ever heard.

It was 4 weeks to the day "training" at Pendleton. They took all of us doctors and I'm talking about fully trained specialist. There was one Jewish ophthalmologist from the Bronx who I remember well. He was spastic and wore thick glasses, but he was one of many that Marine drill instructors tried to teach us to drill a few days. He and several others fell down when they did an about face.

I did a 3-day bivouac at Pendleton. It was cold as heck. I didn't know that California got that cold. This was in early January, '67. He walks up with his helmet and his backpack was on

but it was empty and he was holding his wife's suitcase. His wife had packed his clothes in a little suitcase. I got a picture of the black drill instructor emptying his wife's suitcase into his backpack. They did things like showed us how to break down a .45 and showed us what the M14 looked like. We went out and fired it one day.

You fired what, the pistol?

Well, we fired them both at the firing range, just like the Marines did. I remember where they have the rifle range. I had been hunting a few times; that's how I was raised. One of the sergeants said, "Doc, that was good shooting." I couldn't even see what I'd hit it was so far away. You know they'd have to bring you the target later. I never did see the final target. I felt really good about my being congratulated on how well I'd been shooting. That was the shooting course and then we went out and had a little march through . . . that's when they were finding out about all of the booby traps the Vietcong were setting up. So, we went through that. They'd show us how the mines were placed and what to look for. Bouncing Betty's, which had a little string. If you felt real carefully sometimes you could feel your boot hit the string. What you were to do was to freeze, you know don't move until you got help. And they would disarm it so the string didn't move.

That must have been a bit unnerving to even hear about that stuff?

Oh, naive that's not the word for how we all were at the time. They showed us about not going under trees, how the VC would hang grenades in the foliage of the trees and then set them off remotely when you go under the tree for shade? And then the pungee sticks. They were very common. They would paint poison or manure on these sharp bamboo sticks and put them in the ground.

That was our introduction to Vietnam and so, then we were ready to go. We saw a few movies like John Wayne and Iwo Jima type stuff. I remember one day we were sitting in the classroom, right at the end of our 4-week course at Pendleton and they said, "Okay, we're required to tell you fellows that if there's any sole remaining sons of the family you're not obligated to go. As far as we're concerned, you've been a man to come this far but you can get up to leave right now." And then was this silence. Well, I was a sole remaining son in my family and so were a lot of us and we weren't going to stand up and leave the room at that point. I remember that was an embarrassing thing. . . I don't know when else they could have done that. It could have maybe been done privately, I don't know. Maybe they could have gotten some volunteers, I don't know.

They probably did it that way for the same purpose though to get that result.

Right. Well, that was the result. There's nobody at that point was going to say no. A lot of them went to Okinawa and other bases out there. So, this was the latter part of January, '67. We went to Treasure Island to get on the plane. It was a great big plane, a C-141 or whatever they used to call them.

I remember we sat in it in harness for 10 hours or so until we got to Honolulu. There were no seats; it was either benches or harness type seats.

It took you that long to get there, 10 hours? Wow.

Yes, it was a prop plane.

It was a prop plane?

Yes. Of course, they were all leased from the Government. I think this one though was military. Coming back it was a private 707. Anyway, that's another story. The day before we loaded to go we got word of Chaffee's and Grissom's and White's deaths in the . . .

In the Apollo spacecraft fire?

Yes. I remember we got sad about that. A lot of us got drunk. It was a bad time. We were going to Vietnam. All I knew about Vietnam was Saigon, the only city I heard anything about in the news. What I thought about it politically was . . . Something analogous to me was Korea, which I kind of remembered as a kid. I just thought the North Vietnamese had invaded South Vietnam and it was the same thing as Korea. And the South Vietnamese hollered for help and we said we were going help. I was real gung ho and felt patriotic; so did all of us really.

I don't remember much talk of dissension or revolt against the call. We all felt rather patriotic. So we went. We got to Honolulu and landed and that's where we went to a . . . no, I'm sorry we went over in a 707. It was from Honolulu to Da Nang that we were in one of those big old transports. When the 707 took off from Honolulu that's when we switched planes, because we blew a tire on the runway but we got off the ground and everything. This was a fully loaded plane now. Nothing was said on the radio, and then we saw them circling and we saw the fuel being dumped. I said, "Oh no, we're going to crash before we even get to Vietnam. Well, maybe that's the way we're going to go."

And then the pilot came over the loudspeaker saying that we busted a tire on the takeoff and the vibration had jammed one of the doors so they couldn't close it so they had to go back and fix that and refuel. We went back to Honolulu, and they gave us a whole afternoon and a free hotel room right on Waikiki Beach. I remember that well. Here we were on the way to Vietnam talking to tourists on the beach.

What were you wearing at the time?

The short-sleeved uniform that we could take on R&R. I guess we had one change of clothes that we could wear on R&R.

Anyway, we got the plane fixed and we took off again. Then we went to Okinawa and maybe spent 4 or 5 days there before we went to Vietnam. It was several days before we got to Da Nang. I had it written down that we got to Da Nang on the 3rd of February. The 3rd of January was my last official day as an intern.

Now, did you know before you left what you were going to be doing? Did they say you're going to be?

I had a vague idea. They said, I was going to be with a battalion of Marines. I didn't even know who to salute when I got in country. I saw these chiefs with their big crowns on their arms, I thought they were colonels. I was saluting them until one of them said, "Doc, you don't have to salute us, you're a lieutenant. We're just chiefs."

So, you were a full lieutenant or a jg?

I was a lieutenant and assigned to I-Corps.. Our CO was a captain dermatologist in this little office in Da Nang. We always thought that was an incongruity. Here's a dermatologist and he's our CO over here in this war zone. But anyway, he was a gung ho type. He'd go out in the

field and talk to us. I remember we called him some crazy name. I forgotten what his name really was.

Can we go back for just a minute. You landed in Da Nang?

Yes.

What was your impression when you got off the plane?

Did you see the movie, "Biloxi Blues"? When they got to Biloxi and the guy says, "Oh my God, this is Africa hot."

Yes.

That was the initial impression. Like I want to get my shirt off and I smell the morgue. I smell the dead bodies as soon as we got off the plane. So, the initial impression was, "Gosh, here I am and I've got 12 months, 365 days to go?" And in fact, when we went to the CO's little office there in Da Nang and he got our papers and everything. He said, "Welcome to Nam. If I were you guys I'd blow my fuckin' brains out."

Yes, that was pretty sobering right there.

So, he got the guys to drive us out to our command post. And each little battalion had one doc and a dentist if they could get one. We didn't have a dentist right away, but it was a real fortunate thing the dentist that we got a few weeks later was a boy that I had been through Camp Pendleton with. And we were born the same day. He was from Alabama. And so, the dentist and the doc there was born the same day. And we had already been friends. The battalion had about 1200 men and they had about five or six companies. Ours had five, I think. Each company was about 200 men. They also had an administrative company. Each company was commanded by a captain. Parts of the company were commanded by lieutenants.

A second lieutenant?

Yes, a second lieutenant fresh out of school, fresh out of training. And then they had the patrols and that was the last breakdown. They were usually headed by a corporal. They had about five or six guys in each little patrol. And that's how that was broken down.

We all stayed in this little command post, which maybe was 200 yards across in diameter. It had a real good protection with machine guns nests all around protected by sandbags. We had little hooches to stay in--plywood with screens. And each hooch had sandbags around it.

This was right on the outskirts of Da Nang?

This was near a village called, "Hoi-An." It was near Da Nang, maybe 10 or 15 miles from Da Nang. I didn't drive a vehicle from the time I left the states until I got back to the states. The little driving that I experienced was done by my corpsman or one of the Marines. I had a little "six bed hospital" and what I usually treated was the most common thing--dengue fever.

Break bone fever.

Yes. Real high fever all of a sudden and terrible headaches. We found out just rest and fluids was pretty good for that and they were back on their feet usually within hours. You know little minor things like, minor shrapnel wounds. I remember one captain rushed over about 5:00 o'clock one afternoon from supper. He didn't know that the soup had shellfish in it. He had

already started the hives. By the time we got him to my little clinic there he was starting to get short of breath. I remember how amazed I was how quick the epinephrine worked. It was like turning off a faucet--just immediate relief.

I've got all kinds of stuff written down. I didn't know if you wanted to ask me questions or just kind of go through what I have.

Well, as we go through it I'll probably ask you some questions about the kinds of materials you had to work with? Were you fully equipped to handle most anything?

I had real good medicines, especially painkillers. I had epinephrine for increasing blood pressure, for getting people hydrated with immediate IV's. The corpsmen were excellent and much better than I was with immediate resuscitative measures, because that's what they're trained for.

I was really there mostly as a triage person. For instance. To pick up the wounded we had these choppers, but they were real slow. We called them "flying vacuum cleaners" because they kind of looked like a vacuum cleaner. Anyway, the medevacs was who we would call in to pick up wounded. Every once in a while the colonel who was the head of our battalion would say, "Doc, you've got to go out in the field today to see whether we need to call choppers in." The choppers were really sitting ducks. When they were called in they knew they were going to have a time saving themselves, much less trying to get the wounded out.

I would see which ones we could maybe bring back and at least get them some help before shipped them to the hospital in Da Nang. And which one we had to call the choppers in for . . . The ones we had to call the choppers in for had to be pretty bad off . . . like near death. I remember once going out there to triage and the first one I saw had been hit right where his flight jacket closed. We call it the "cross of death" a "T" right at the throat . . . the little notch in the throat above the breast bone. And going down to the end of the breast bone and then across from nipple to nipple. Anywhere in there was . . . I never saw anybody live if they were hit anywhere in that area and he was hit right in the center, right where the "T" would cross, right where the flight jacket closed. I talked to some captains who said they had charged some villages and one of them broke down and cried in the middle of the fire fight, because I think 12 or 13 of his Marines had been killed instantly right between the eyes before they could even move. They were on the ground and were hit by sniper fire between their nose and their helmet line.

I talked to other Marines who had been there 6 months and they said, "Doc, I've had buddies killed right by my side and I have never personally seen anything to shoot at." Six months they'd been in country and had not seen one enemy to shoot at. They just weren't trained. How long could this go on? I'm surprised we stayed there as long as we did with that kind of war and the mines. The mines were the worst. Each step you didn't know if it was going to be last.

I need to tell you this. I had been there about a week and the captains of the companies would have the fresh guys, the new grunts, write a letter home when they came in. The first thing they did before they hardly took a shower, the first thing they did was after they unpacked was write a letter a home. I talked to one of the guys, I think he was from Michigan, because he's just a nice fellow and sitting at the little table there writing his mom. The very next day I heard a little "whump" about 100 yards off from our command post and saw the smoke and heard them holler for the corpsmen. We went our two corpsmen out in their old jeep. They got back with a piece of his leg, maybe 8 inches long and that was it. That was all that was left of him.

A mortar round hit him?

No, a mine. And that was my real transformation from being real gung ho to saying, "Something is not right here. This is the real thing." It changed my whole life, I guess.

Within just a few days?

Yes. Yes, really from that moment.

From the moment this guy got hit?

Yes.

Watching him write the letter and then having him dead the next day.

Yes, and how he was killed. And so, that was the first week I was there. Movies was our big entertainment. We had this open air movie theater. It had some columns, wooden columns with tin roof on it and that's where they'd show the movies. Just a few days before I had gotten to my command . . . two, one we called it, Second Battalion, First Marine Regiment, Two, One. That was the number of our battalion. Anyway, a kid had been watching "A Shot in the Dark" and a stray round hit him right in the temple and killed him instantly, watching the moving.

He was watching the movie?

Yes. And every once and a while we heard stray rounds coming over our heads.

This was a fire fight going on in the distance?

Yes, yes it could have been anywhere. It could have been 2 miles away. Those are powerful rifles, AK-47's and ours too.

Another time I remember at the movie. Sometimes I would watch the movie with colonel and the sergeant major. We had our own personal folding chairs We'd buy them from the natives in Da Nang. We set up our chairs and all of a sudden we looked up and here these mortars were coming right down on us. Here's this immediate scramble and face down in the dirt. The captain of the company that was shooting the mortar that night was just returning fire, but he got his coordinates screwed up. And the colonel yelled, "Get on the horn, get on the horn and tell Captain so and so that he's got to raise his coordinates." We almost bought it at the movie that night from our own round.

These were outdoor movies?

Yes, oh yes. There was no indoor. Well, I take that back. After a while in Da Nang they did have indoor movie theaters for the Marines. That was a little bit later.

This is still '66 when this is going on?

No, '67.

Oh, the beginning of '67, February?

Yes. I talked to one of my friends from Alabama--a marine lieutenant and a few days later I found out that he had just been on a patrol and got hit right in the chest. He just had time to tell his sergeant he was hit before he died. That was about the same time the kid stepped on the mine.

So, you were dealing with death every day then?

Yes. It was prevalent. And as I said, every once in a while I would have to go out myself to triage. One of the triages . . . that was the kid that was hit right between his flak jacket. So, I identified quickly the dead and then there were a couple we did have to call the choppers in on that had to be moved by chopper. The others we carried back to the command on ontoses. Ontoses were just . . .

What were they called?

We called them "ontoses." They were just little tanks.

How do you spell that?

Ontos. They were little tanks. All they were were big cannons with treads. There was hardly room for one guy to drive it. It was just cannons, cannons, cannons and treads. We'd just get on top of the thing with the wounded man and ride back to the command post with him. And then we'd patch him up. Then we'd call Da Nang to come out with ambulance to get him and bring him to the hospital.

Anyway, on this particular triage episode we identified where the enemy was firing from. Again, we never saw anybody.

You didn't see anybody either?

No. They're on their radios all the time, so they called the phantoms, the phantom jets in from Da Nang and they came in. I said, "Oh, I see some fireworks here." And they said, "Doc, get down, this is going to be pretty tough." This was only about 200 yards off where they were going to hit the enemy. First, we saw the smoke and the flames from the napalm and then they let go with the big bombs. The concussion was so great, that it lifted me about a foot off the ground, all of us. I mean that was a real eye-opener, how powerful the bombs were. That was a little triage episode. But, every once in a while too, I'd have to go out if it was real hot for instance and go out with them on their little operations. And this would be maybe two or three companies with the colonel and the sergeant major.

Did you carry any equipment with you?

I had my .45 all the time, but I never carried a rifle. I was loaded down with mostly salt tablets and IV fluids. We had guys just go bananas from heat stroke. Just start running around shooting in the air. It didn't take much of a psychiatrist to know when they had to go home. We'd just write CONUS on their packet.

CONUS.

CONUS and that was it. All it took was my signature and CONUS and he was home.

So, the CO and you had to sign the certificate?

Yes.

And you didn't have to put any reason down?

Oh, yes I'd put a reason.

What would you put?

Psychological breakdown. But yes, a diagnosis. As far as a lot of paperwork, no.

This wasn't heat stroke, this was actually . . .

It was both. Now, on the little operation I went on in the middle of the night, here we were single file. I mean it was like the old Indian movies that you'd see. It was hand signals. I was maybe two-thirds of the way back in this long column and every once in a while you would get the signal from . . . it was 15 paces between us. He'd turn around with his hand signal he'd just put his palm down and we'd all squat. And then we'd see the sergeant major or one of the officers coming back looking with his M16 on each side. They had heard something. One of them said, "Doc, the kid in the back of the line is having a breakdown." So, I went back there and there was this 18-year-old kid and he was crying and shaking. I knew we were in big trouble. What can I do with this guy? We were in the middle of the night here, in the middle of Vietnam and I just took him aside and I said, "Listen, I know you're scared, I'm scared too, I'm sure the sergeant major's scared, but we've got to stick together and we've got to make it through this." I just shook him, literally shook him. And said, "Do you understand?" I looked him in the eye and he said, "Yes, sir." That was my psychological treatment.

That was your psychological intervention right there?

Yes, he made it through the night. I don't know if he went home or not. That was the first bad psych problem I saw. There was another one. A Marine came to me one day just in the clinic because his lieutenant sent him in. And he said, "Doc," I said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, I think I blacked out yesterday during a firefight." I said, "Tell me about it." He said, "Well, when I woke up they were still firing at the enemy, but I found my rifle was pointed at my lieutenant--the back of his head."

Oh God!

And I said, "What were you thinking?" He said, "I don't know, but I think I was thinking of killing him." That was an immediate CONUS. I saw several of those. That was the beginning of the disciplinary problems; it just got worse. After I left my battalion, I heard about some kids that were drafted from the ghetto in Detroit that threw a couple of grenades in their commander's tent and wounded him, it didn't kill him. That was just when that was starting.

The fragging?

Yes, they were going to kill him. Marijuana, heroin, and cocaine had started. But I didn't see much of that when I was over there.

You didn't see it over there the whole time?

I saw some grass, but I never saw any strong drugs. No, no. But it happened right after. I'd say after the fall of '67 is when it really started getting reported from the different Marine groups.

You were talking about being on this patrol and having to deal with this kid in the back.

Yes. So, we go through that night. It was silent that whole night. Just at daylight we could start whispering again. Somebody said, "Zero hours and 10 minutes." I didn't even know

what “zero hour” was. They said, “Zero.” And they said, “Everybody just relax and you can sit down if you want too.” So, we sat and they said, “Just watch the skies.” And they showed us which part of the skies to watch.

Another amazing story. This was my introduction to the B-52's. I guess it was just about the crack of dawn, but you could see you could see in the sky. Before I could see anything or hear anything, I saw the whole earth from horizon to horizon start erupting in smoke and then I heard the bombs. They got louder and louder and then the concussion hit us. How anything survived those B-52's. If you stared hard enough and long enough you could finally see the things way, way up in the sky. I don't know how they were, but you had to really look for them. It was just . . . in other words it was just out of the blue without any warning when the bombs hit. You didn't hear them. And that was an amazing night for me.

So, that was the first operation. I went on another one a little bit later that was in the hotter season--July maybe. And on that one was the first time I had to duck. We were in an old abandoned Vietnamese home, but just from about waist level was anything left and that was the walls. The incoming rounds from the rifles you couldn't hear until they hit. And then you would hear the pops. We saw the imprints that the rounds were making on the walls and so everybody said, “Hit the deck.” And then we heard the pops. So, it missed us just a few inches really. We could see where the fire was coming from in the tree line, but again we didn't see anyone. That was the first time I really had to get down.

About that same day, one of my lieutenant friends who had just gotten back from R&R in Australia. Australia had just opened up and he was talking about how great Australia was and how much fun he had had. He was all gung ho about coming back and killing some VC. Well, he had this bright idea of filing his pins down on his grenades.

Filing them down.

Yes, so he could pull them real quick. And yes, he could pull them real quick. The only trouble was they were filed down so far that one of them went off on his suspenders right after I had finished talking to him. He was about 100 yards down the road. And again, we heard a little “whump” and saw some smoke and heard the awful cry of “Corpsman.” I still have nightmares hearing that Corpsman, Corpsman. It was him, his guts was on the ground and he lived maybe 2 minutes.

His own grenade?

Yes. It set off another one. It set off two grenades. The prime one and then another one on his belt. It killed him and his radio operator. It blew his head off instantly and it killed this black sergeant, but he lived a few hours. The sergeant lives the longest.

The point men in the little patrols had stories to tell. Besides each step being made and stepping on a mine the point man had to be the bravest guy in the world, because you never knew after each step or after each turn in the forest, pitch black what was going to be next. You might have your throat cut as well as a mine or whatever. Anyway, they had a lot of stories to tell. They said sometimes they wouldn't see anything in the dark and they would just get down on the ground and lift their rifle up and fire around in a circle, 360 degrees at nothing and just wait and see what would happen. That was the point men.

We converted from M14's to M16's while I was there in the spring of '67.

And they had a lot of problems with them originally, too?

They had a lot of problems. We didn't know it at the time. At the time they were great because they were so light. And after an all day of lugging those M14's they'd get pretty heavy. But the M16's felt like toys. They found about the dust and the mud and all of that. At first the power of them was just great. I remember they brought a VC into our command post one night and he just had one round below his knee and all that was left of his leg was just shreds, just one round and he died there as soon as he got to the little command post. That impressed me on how powerful each round was of those things. Of course, they were automatic and they let me shoot one and see how it felt. You feel pretty powerful when you shoot a machine gun.

I was going to ask you what a typical day was like in that place, from the time you woke up?

A typical day was very peaceful. From about daybreak--which was about 6:00 a.m.--we had a little briefing down at the colonel's place which had a lot of sandbags. I think it was maybe even underground a little bit. He and the sergeant major and each captain of each company and maybe my chief would meet and we'd get briefed on what we were going to do that day and where the VC were supposedly were. We never knew where they were and then that lasted about an hour. And then we had breakfast. The meals were great.

They were fighting and they were . . . how incongruous?

Yes. All of this technology. Anyway, back to breakfast. You could have whatever you wanted for breakfast, ham and eggs, the whole bit. And then we'd go back and have sick call. I'd see dengue fever and headaches and pungy stick wounds and thing like that--minor stuff. One day my nurse came in and she said she felt this little lump on her scalp. She was a Vietnamese nurse, just a local girl we used for a nurse. I felt up there and hey, there is it felt like a little sebaceous cyst. I put my finger on it and I said, "I think we can open this up and take this out right here." So I shaved her head a little bit; it was right on the top of her head. I gave her a local and opened it up. Sure enough I expressed the sebaceous material out.

I said, "Gee, I wonder how deep this thing is?" I had my gloves on. So, I poked my finger in that thing and I swear my finger did not touch bottom. I went down, down, down and I was looking at my finger level and her eyes. I was at the level at her eyes. I said, "Rose, are you okay?" And she was smiling. I said, "Get the jeep, get this girl to the hospital now." And sure enough she had one of these strange . . . but it was all in the scalp. It had just depressed the skull in that far down to her eye level.

What was it?

It was some kind of a benign scalp tumor.

Wow!

That was not a typical day, but you asked me what went on in our little clinic and that's what went on one day. Another day we had pet dogs. Sometimes these stray dogs would come around. Well, we named our dog Ho Chi Minh, not knowing that it was a female. Soon as the colonel found out it was a female he said, "Okay, doc you've got to spay this dog, because the Marines like it and they want to have this pet." Okay, I don't even think I ever even scrubbed on a hysterectomy. Maybe I scrubbed on a hysterectomy as an intern. I know I've never done one.

Anyway, we finally got the dog and held her down. She was vicious and had long teeth. But we got the IV in one of her leg veins and put her out. I opened her up. I just felt where the

vagina was and just went longitudinal from there and got in. I couldn't find a damn thing as far as a uterus or I didn't even know where the fallopian . . . it must be so small in a dog I couldn't find it. She starts twitching and snapping and I said, "Well, hell we just failed here. Let's get her sewed up if we can." I've done all I can. I was sweating and they were sweating. Just about the time I put the last stitch in she jumps up and snaps at all of us. She just barely missed really getting us. From that day on I couldn't get the stitches out of that dog. When she'd see any of the corpsmen, she recognized each of us. That was my hysterectomy in Vietnam.

Wow!

You've got me so interested, I'm going to write this stuff down.

Well, I'm going to have it on tape so you don't have to.

Well, I mean I've got lots to tell.

All right, go ahead.

Another day the colonel had noticed these strange looking wildcats around the command post. He didn't like them because they acted like wildcats and they'd hiss at you. He could tell they had long teeth too. They were Lynx's I think that they were. We had just never seen them before in our country. But they lived on the horrendous number of rats that were at the command post. We didn't think about that, but he wanted them eliminated. So, he got this Marine corporal to go around with a shotgun and shoot the wildcats. So, one day I was in my hooch and this was siesta time. I mean siesta time was hot, like 110, 120. We all had our little fans. I was racked out on my bed. I felt something looking at me. I turned my head real slow and right outside my hooch . . . I guess this is about, oh, it couldn't been more than 10 yards, I saw this cat, sitting, frozen. She was looking at the rats, which were going up and down. You know where the hooch gables come together? Right up in the arch of the roof. I knew what she was looking at.

I said, hell you know what, I'm going to kill me a cat for the colonel. So, I got up and I don't think I had ever fired my .45 since I had been in the country. I got my .45, loaded it and cocked it. I sneaked out, I mean I really sneaked out. I crept around I was just 10 yards away. We had all of our hooches surrounded by sandbags. So, the cat was inside the sandbags, which were next to the hooch. I was outside the sandbags, I went out the back door.

I braced my feet, two handed position and put that sucker right on the cat's chest and squeezed, squeezed, pow! It must have been the loudest noise the battalion had ever heard. I mean I had corpsmen coming out of their hooches. Doc, what in the hell. I'll tell you I hit that cat right where I put it. I mean it blew its chest apart. It must have jumped 10 feet in the air and came down dead. That was my killing in Vietnam.

Now that look back on it that was probably the worst thing I could have done, because I just made the rats worse. And so, getting along with the typical day. We had our sick call and we saw what few patients. Sometimes we didn't see anything. We always had MADCAP. The corpsmen and I would go out of the command post into the surrounding countryside and set up little hooches, tents with plywood at the bottom for MADCAP. MADCAP was treating the civilians. They would come sometimes for miles. Sometimes the ones that could carry old people or wounded would carry them on these poles. You know like you see old shots of people being carried on a litter?

Like a sling underneath?

Yes. The poles would be between the two carriers and a rope sling. We'd see them. One day they brought a little child, a baby maybe between 12 and 18 months. It had this little cap on its head, an old dirty bandage type thing. I took the bandage off. Oh, my God, this is a necrotic ulcer. Who knows when they bathed. It had gotten so bad that it eroded to the bone and it was at least 3 or 4 inches across. All we could do for that is clean it up and hope it would granulate in and so we did and it got better and better. We gave the mother several bars of soap.

And then I noticed after a while it wasn't looking so good. It started getting worse. We always took a Vietnamese lieutenant with us, we called him "Tee Wee Tom." Tee Wee was our word in Vietnamese for lieutenant.

He was an ARV?

Yes. Tee Wee Tom questioned them and we found that they taking the baby to Da Nang on the street and showing how bad the baby's wound was and asking for donations. If they couldn't get the money they would sell the soap that we gave them. That was just one of the frustrating things that we dealt with at MADCAP.

After MADCAP we'd come back and usually it was like a siesta in the afternoons.

How often would you do the MEDCAPs?

I want to say twice a week. It may have been three times. It wasn't everyday. It was at least twice a week. It wasn't more than say 3 or 4 miles in the radius from our command post. We had several of them and we'd just go from one to the other. It would have me, Tee Wee Tom, our interpreter, and maybe two corpsmen. We'd give shots and clean up wounds and see what we could.

One day they brought a woman in that couldn't walk, and I did a neurological exam on her and I couldn't find anything wrong with her. I started getting angry. I thought she was putting on. I said, "Sure you can walk. Let me help you up." And she kept saying, "No, no, no." And finally I said, "Take her in and at least get her x-rayed." She had a bullet next to her spine and I didn't know it.

Another time they bought this kid in in one of the personnel carriers. He would ride around interpreting for the driver and the guy riding shotgun on the personnel carrier. They hit a mine and he was blown off the top of the personnel carrier. Anyway, he had a shoulder dislocation. One of the first things we learned in medical school was. . . It was a Hypocratic method of replacing shoulder dislocations. You put your bare foot in their arm socket and just pull, pull, steady, steady, steady, strong, stronger until it pops back into place. Well, I just gave a little pull and he squealed like bloody murder and I said, "Oh, hell, I don't what's the matter here. It's not working. Get him in x-ray." His arm was broken in two, his humerus.

His arm was broken?

Yes. I didn't have any x-rays.

So, he didn't have a dislocation or he had a dislocation?

Oh, it was dislocated and broken, yes. Pulling isn't going to help a broken arm. So, that was another day.

So, anyway after our siesta we sometimes played volleyball or basketball. We threw horseshoes, lifted weights. Sometimes we'd jog if we had room around the command post. And

then it was about supper time, and supper time was great, always good food. But if you didn't take your cap off as soon as you walked into supper or the bar, especially in the bar, you'd have to get rounds for everybody. It was a cover rule they called it.

After supper was the movie and then if you had time you wrote a letter and went to bed, and that was it.

That was a typical day?

Yes.

I'll tell you what we're going to stop here, we've been going for an hour.

No. And I haven't quite finished my . . . this is my battalion time and then I went with a little emergency hospital.

Well, we can start. In fact, let's pick up next time. Let's pick up with the start of the battalion.

All right.

Well, if this isn't a good break, let's go to where you think is a good break, why don't we do it that way? Do you want to continue a little bit? We can go for a couple more minutes if you think you're in a middle of a thought or something and you don't want to pick up.

No, I think this is good, because I'd have to go back over my notes. I've been talking off the cuff here and I hadn't really looked at my notes. I'm pretty sure I'm almost at the end of the battalion time. Then I went with a little, like a MASH unit for 5 months, for the last 5 months.

So, why don't we pick up with this right around this time for the next interview?

Yes, I'll write down where we got to.

Okay. Well, you know where we left off? I was asking you about your typical day it's that first assignment you talked about what you did. You saw patients and then if you had time you did some jogging. You told me about the cover rule in the club.

Oh, yes.

And then we kind of stopped right about there.

Okay. Well, I'll just go on with this. We're still with the battalion out in the bush, close to a little village called, "Hoian." In fact, I met some Vietnamese people here in Houston that lived very close to there.

I remember once we went out to our little MEDCAPs, where we could tend to the civilians. Some of the people asked me to have lunch with them. So, a couple of the corpsmen and I went with them to their little house. Most of the homes were just cement and adobe, I guess, but dirt floors. There weren't any wood floors and usually just one big room. I guess they had a little screen portion for their bedroom.

Anyway, we ate there and the food was delicious. Where we were we was close to Da Nang, near the South China Sea. In fact, sometimes we would take a little break and go swimming, go up to Da Nang in the jeep and go swimming. Anyway, there was a lot of seafood, a lot of pork, and a lot of spice. You see, the French were there for so long. Vietnam was a

French colony, French Indochina until Dienbienphu. Anyway, most of the older generation spoke at least some French. In fact, I could converse with them better in French than I could in Vietnamese.

The food was good, but about 8 hours later in a middle of a movie that night it hit me from both ends. I don't think it was cooked as well as the American's were used to. Anyway it didn't sit well with me and I remember both ends on the john, which were just great big oil drums in a little screened off plywood hooch. That was a bad night.

At the MEDCAPs where we'd see the civilians, one of the rewarding and real good experiences that I remember was seeing the kids open up these boxes, cardboard boxes that had been shipped from the states. The guys and I would write home and ask the churches and groups to send old clothes and whatever. Just seeing the kids eyes light up when they'd see these new clothes. They'd never had new clothes and they'd put them on right there and smile. Once some oranges came in and the parents told me the kids had never seen oranges before.

I think I described mostly besides the wounds, shrapnel wounds and minimal things was mostly dengue fever, but sometimes I would recognize things that were a little bit worse. My interpreter--Tee Wee Tom--got weak and I could tell. I was just getting ready to be transferred and I couldn't really pinpoint what it was that he had. But then the fellow that replaced me sent him to the hospital in Da Nang and they did a blood smear. They immediately diagnosed malaria. I just missed it. We just didn't see a lot of it, but looking back I should have realized that it was something besides dengue fever.

So you didn't see a lot of malaria?

No, but I missed his. At the command post there--the CP--I had my little clinic. We were warned about sleepwalkers. I think what had happened was that the draft had gotten so big that kids had gotten into the service because they hadn't been screened very well. And sometimes sleepwalkers would get in. We heard about a sleepwalker in a battalion close to us who had gotten up in the middle of the night and had been shot by his fellow soldiers. Of course, they were out in the field; they weren't in the command post. So it probably wouldn't have happened if it was in the command post. So, we had to be on the look out for that.

Every once in a while we'd go out with our MEDCAPs and have to cross these great big rivers, because we were close to the Delta, close to the coast. So, the outlets were pretty big, pretty broad. At that time this was in the spring of '67. They were still using what the soldiers called "otters" the nickname for these great big personnel carriers that would convey them across these big estuaries. The otters were holdovers from World War II. In fact, a lot of the Marines said they made landings with them in some of the beaches in the Pacific. But they were very, very heavy. They held a lot of men, but they had to close them up tight when they transported them across. The VC figured out real quick that their .50 caliber rounds would penetrate these otters. They sunk a couple of them and most of the Marines drowned. Right after I had seen them there still being used, they switched those out quick to lighter machines that the kids could be on. They wouldn't be sealed in there. I have forgotten exactly how they were constructed. They weren't the old otters anymore.

At the battalion we had a shower rigged up. It was made from an old phantom jet wing tank. It had some gas butane and we'd heat up water and it was a pretty good shower.

At night the corpsmen came to my hooch and said they had a captured VC that had been shot in the leg. Well, his leg was practically off. Just one round of that M16. I knew he was dying. He died just a few minutes after he arrived at our command post. We shipped his body to

Da Nang. They did an autopsy there for some reason. I'm not sure why. I think they did autopsies on most of the bodies, American or enemy. They said his intestines were just full of parasites. That seemed to be the usual for the VC once they did the autopsies on just to show what poor medical care they had and how indigent they were.

But it was the wound that killed him?

Yes. The wound had killed him.

You mentioned dengue was one thing you saw a lot of where you were, but you said you didn't see a lot of malaria. What other types of tropical diseases did you have to contend with?

Not much. We were pretty well protected from the civilians. You know the C-rations and all of our food was shipped right from the states. I remember one time on an operation I was with them for several days out there. It was just terribly hot and we'd get shot at and there would be a lull and then we'd march a little further. Right in the middle of the day one day it must have been over 110. We heard choppers coming and some of the Marines said, "Hey, here comes some food." The choppers got real low and we could see the gunner guys kicking off these crates and they hit the grounds. We opened them up and they had ice cream that was not melted and beer. Here we were and I said, "now, what kind of a war is this?" Here we are out in the field here in the jungle and choppers are bringing ice cream and beer. That just struck me as not only incongruity but a waste. It was good, it went down good though.

One time I was there at my clinic and one of the kids that drove one of the personnel carriers. These were just glorified jeeps that had steel sides and a top so you could transport people without them getting shot. They had treads instead of wheels. Anyway, he was the driver and he had a pet monkey. I guess he had gotten a monkey from when he was young. He let me hold it and all. The very next day the corpsman and I got this call to go out a few hundred yards from the command post. But anyway, he had hit a mine and it was just him and his buddy. They didn't have any Marines with them at that time. He hit a mine on his side of the vehicle. He was on the ground and just looking at me and saying, "Hurry, hurry, doc." And when I knelt down I could tell that one of his legs was still in its trousers, but on his body. It has been blown just completely off, but it was still in his pants.

I got his IV started. That's about all I could do. We did get a medevac to him in there and get him out. I heard later from the chopper pilots that carried him back to the hospital that he tried to crawl out of the chopper and commit suicide. I guess he just knew he was dying and panicked. He did die a few minutes after he got to the hospital. That was just one of the mine instances I remember. I think I told you about the one that really struck me hard when I first got there.

That was the first one, yes.

Another one on the operation that I remember. We had what was called "Claymore mines." They were little bit longer than a legal size envelope, but were concave. They were bent. The concave part, the part that bent out. . . You had to be very careful when you were setting them. That was the part that was going to explode like a shotgun and throw everything that way. Whereas, the concave or back part was like the butt end of a rifle. Anyway, one of the kids either had his hand on the wrong side or wasn't paying attention to which way it was facing. It went off and his hand was in the way. When he looked down it was just a strange thing. It

was like his arm ended at his wrist and it was just a regular skeleton hand, just the tendons and the bones were there. That's just something I remember about the Claymore mine and how dangerous they were.

I don't know how long I was with them on this operation but it must have been several days. One of the nights we were out in the middle of nowhere and in a pretty hilly area. We had reached the border of a little valley. We heard something moving. The colonel thought it was the enemy. He was going to call for a flare and I didn't know how they did that.

We were fairly close to the beach and at that time the battleship *New Jersey* had just arrived. It was offshore about 20 miles, just sitting there. The reason I remember this is the telephone system was so strange. I'm not exaggerating when I say that it was at least six relays, maybe seven or eight. In other words, the Marines would ring their little telephones and get a station maybe a mile or two away, if that far. It all had to be in code and then they'd have to say, "What's your call sign?" And then they'd say, "We're Battalion Alpha Group so and so." They would then answer, "This is Bird's Nest Charlie." Then the next one would say, "This is Tarzan Tree swing."

Anyway, it went on like that and about the seventh or eighth relay was the battleship *New Jersey*. Then they called for the flare. And it was right on target. They just fired one of their regular sized shells with a flare instead of a round. Little parachutes lit up the sky and the whole area right there where they wanted it. I'll never forget how wonderful I thought that was.

You could see everything on the ground?

Yes. And what we heard were pigs, not the enemy. That's the end of the story. All that for a bunch of pigs.

I guess in all operations the Marines liked to use their grenades, whether it was for play or enemy. They would get some trash, dig a little hole, throw the grenade in there, and blow it up. That was kind of fun. But when they said, "Fire in the hole" you hit the deck, because you didn't know where this particular grenade was going to be thrown or who was going to throw it. Everybody just hit the deck. That's how they got rid of their trash with their grenades.

On a later operation we had set up camp close to the sea again. This was north, close to Hoann. We were in a valley surrounded by mountains and the Marine said, "Well, doc, you better dig a foxhole because they might have mortars up there."

I thought they were kidding and I didn't dig a foxhole. Sure enough, about 8:00 o'clock that night the Marines said, "Incoming," and it had a little bit different sound and you'd hear them coming. I saw them hitting maybe a half a mile away, so I wasn't worried. Then, one hit right on my hooch and I almost jumped in the foxhole with the Marine. I was that scared. It didn't take me long to realize when they say dig a foxhole they mean everybody. But it didn't last long. I don't even think anybody was wounded during that mortar attack.

I have highlighted chaplain services here. They were all good. We had a Protestant and a Catholic priest at our battalion. And most of the Marines there attended services. It was something we did and depended on. It was just part of being there and being a part of that group. There were a few who didn't, but as a rule most guys attended one or the other services every Sunday. And then they had meetings during the week too.

Twenty-two years after World War II ended there were still sergeants and, in fact, our colonels were veterans of World War II. One of the sergeants we called "Top Joe" was the top sergeant and was missing his front teeth. They had been shot out at Iwo Jima. He was the one that told me that I'd get use to seeing the dead bodies and the destruction. He was wrong.

You never got use to that horrible sight?

No, in fact I think it got worse. I know it did. One of the captains came in one day and I hadn't seen him, because he stayed in the field. In other words, he didn't stay at the Command Post. He and his company just stayed out in the field. But he came in, I think, to get the new M16 rifles and then he was going right back out. He told me that once he was charging a village with his entire company and they had been caught in the middle of a rice field. So they were sitting ducks. Every time they would peep up above the rice field a lot of them got hit right between their eyes. The sniper fire by the enemy was just excellent. He said he was in tears by the time that firefight was over. I don't know how many he lost, but it was a lot of his men.

Another captain told me that once they were charging a village and under intense fire. Just at the point where they all got up and really began their charge, because they knew that the enemy was either very low on ammunition or out, and had started their run toward the village the enemy who was dug in the village had the women and children and old men--civilians--between the Americans and themselves. They ordered the civilians to stand up so they would get shot by the charging Americans. And a lot of them did get shot and blamed it on the Americans. He said that was not uncommon. I had gotten back by the time My Lai occurred and I never heard of anything like that happening. I never heard of any Marine shooting an unarmed civilian in cold blood . . . never heard that. The VC didn't have the regard for life that the Americans did.

Once I took my nurse who was just a little Vietnamese girl. She must have been a teenager or maybe 18 or 19. Anyway, we just went for a little visit to the hospital in Da Nang where I knew a couple of men were who had been hit.

It appeared to me that one of the priorities in the South Vietnamese army even above defending their country was having their clothes look just right. Their pants had to be pegged just right. The starch had to be just right. The crease in their shirts and their . . . Do you understand what I'm saying?

Yes, oh yes.

That's just how they were. I think it was beginning to be a big problem, especially in Da Nang. Out in the field we didn't have much contact with them except for our interpreters, but we really saw a lot of them and they had had jobs like protecting hospitals or little checkpoints. They took their authority to heart. Anyway, they had this big thing and they were going to arrest my nurse, because she didn't have the right papers. I looked at my driver and he looked at me and I said, "Let's just drive." We stomped the accelerator and took off. That Vietnamese soldier shot in the air. We didn't know if he was going to shoot us, but we did stop when he shot in the air. That was just the kind of thing and we were delayed for several hours while they went over her "papers." Just ridiculous. They were so dependent on us, and yet they didn't do very well for themselves. They didn't have any good leadership and they were more worried about their clothes than they were about working and fighting.

Then I got my orders to be transferred. We usually spend maybe 6 months, sometimes a little bit more, with the battalion and then we would go to a hospital. And ours was in Da Nang.

When was that?

I was with the battalion from about February 1st to September 1st of '67. Then I got these orders and lo and behold it didn't say hospital. The First Med Battalion was the name of

the hospital. It didn't say First Med Battalion. So, I asked around and I said, "Hey, this has got to be a mistake." And they said, "Well, go check it out; go up to Da Nang."

So, I got the corpsman to drive me up to Da Nang and went to the command place. I said to the sergeant who was issuing orders, "This has got to be a mistake. Chu Lai."

It's a what kind of a place?

I'm trying to think of a word. Where we would skate, an easy place, easy duty. If we were having easy duty we were skating. I said, "Okay." It had a certain date, so I just got a jeep right up to the air base. Air base that was kind of a misnomer. All it was is just a little stretch of ground where the DC-3s and choppers would land. I got there just in time. I had my pack and these big duffle bags, and a fan. If you had your .45, and your duffle bag and your fan that was the three essentials. I scrambled on board just he was taxiing and we took off and I got to Chu Lai and reported in.

Boy, what a great place. It was a little bit north of Da Nang, but in a beautiful . . . you know like these solid rock cliffs right on the coast. Beautiful water. In fact, a lot of the doctors and Marines were skin diving there. They had bought these cameras to use under water and they had all of these pictures of fish and everything. I said, "man, this is great." They had a good little hospital. Now, most of their wounded besides the Marines were the ROKS--the Korean Marines. It was an acronym for Republic of Korea--the ROKS. That was a different kettle of fish. The ROKS hardly ever talked, very stoic, but very, very tough. In fact, when interviewed about what they would do if they were leading the show there in Vietnam they said, "Well, we'd just kill them all." End of story. So that was their philosophy.

Anyway, I remember I was still just a GMO (general medical officer) there. I would make rounds with my seniors--the surgeons. They would point out to me the different things. I remember one of the things they did there was circumcisions, which I didn't see where I had been . . . I couldn't have done those anyway. We didn't have the facilities. When I say, circumcisions that doesn't ring true with what we think about circumcising babies. This was acute infection, terrible. The skin over the glans was swollen shut. Even urine couldn't come out. It was like an emergency. First, they would have to drain the pus. Then they'd have to wait until the swelling to go down. The circumcision at that point was a great big deal. You had to have an IV and anesthesia.

And how old were these children?

No, no these were the Marines.

Oh, these were the Marines.

Yes. See what happened, they would get gonorrhea or just dirty out in the field and then all of a sudden they couldn't pee anymore and they would rush them in and do an emergency circumcision. Well, it was a big deal. That was an eyeopener.

Anyway, making rounds one day one of the ROKs had stepped on a mine and it went off behind him instead of in front of him or instead of right under him. You know the expression "blowing your ass off." This one blew his ass off. He would just smile and say, "Thanks doc," and just lie there. I always wondered what happened to him, even if he lived, because it had just been a few days after it happened that I saw him. That was the worse rear end wound I've ever heard of.

I was having a great time and learning from the surgeons. They were kind of like being on vacation compared to the work I'd seen at the hospital in Da Nang. I got some more orders and guess what? It was a mistake. This was 10 days later.

It was?

I was at Chu Lai 10 days in that little hospital, but it was a great 10 days. I knew it was coming. I didn't even argue. I just got back on the DC-3 and flew back to Da Nang. Now, I was back at the little hospital where I knew I was going to be anyway.

Where was that?

It was called "First Med Battalion, First Med Bat." That was the name. It was like a MASH unit, except we had some Quonset huts for the surgery suites, which were air conditioned. Sometimes it would get real busy. I can remember standing there and working with the orthopedists trying to decide whether we could save a guy's leg or arm or whatever. I remember once looking over in the corner and there was one of the leg of one of the Marines we were operating on. There was his leg still in his boot up against the wall. They just cut his pants and put him on the operating table with his boot and foot in it.

That was a mine too?

Yes. I remember once they were unloading the choppers and . . . this is a bad story. It was a Korean--a ROK--and they were unloading the choppers. Some would be alive and some dead. This one was just half his body from the waist up. The corpsman out in the field had tied a tourniquet around his waist. So here was a half a body with a tourniquet around it. I guess he was just . . . I don't know what he was thinking, but what else could he have done?

The main thing that I did at the medical battalion was triage. In other words, they'd bring the wounded in and I would get the IV started and get them ready for surgery if they needed surgery. Or I would clean wounds or dig shrapnel out of the wounds, the minimal wounded. And then I would assist the surgeons in surgery. We learned to start IV's in a unique way. I didn't see that in civilian work at all, even in Charity in New Orleans as an intern. We had these big, long, large gauge needles. For a lot of the Marines... they were so dirty and blown to hell and back, we would have to start their IV's. We called them "subclavians." It was just above the collar bone, just lateral to the V in the throat, where the manubrium has the little notch in it. We would angle these great big long needles toward that notch behind their collar bone and try to hit the subclavian vein. We could get a lot of fluid in them real quick.

I wasn't real good at that, but I could hit it every once and a while. There were a couple of guys that were real good at it.

One kid I remember came in. He must have been 18 years old. I was stunned. It was before I could even think of what to do, because I knew both legs were gone and I could see that one of his arms were so badly mangled there was no way I could start an IV. So, he had one extremity to start an IV and I did. He looked up at me and smiled and said, "Thanks, doc." That's all he said. It's just things like that just strike you, forever.

I did get to see two hospital ships while I was in the Navy, the *Sanctuary* and the *Repose*. They choppered me out there to visit some of the wounded guys who had gone out there. I was very impressed. They could do open heart surgery out there on those boats. In fact, I saw one of my medical school classmates who happened to be on one of the ships. He had joined in World War II at 18, had been through Korea, then went to med school, and now was serving on the *Repose* in Vietnam. I thought he was a real dedicated individual.

One day I got a call. It was a corpsman who told me, "One of your old corpsman at your battalion is wounded and he's here and he asked for you." So, I ran up there and sure enough. He said, "Doc, it's my leg." I looked and it was a through and through large caliber wound through his leg. But he had no pulse. So, it had severed his femoral artery and, by golly, we had some vascular surgeons there and they repaired it. They saved his leg.

Another one came in. It was another of my old corpsmen. He was handing his M16 to one of his buddies and it went off. It hit him in the abdomen. Those rounds just tore you up. They couldn't save him. He lived a few days, but it was so bad. His intestines were just blown away and it was just too much damage.

We had great recreation activities at the little hospital. All kinds of model kits and puzzles. You could paint, if you wanted to. You could get art sets. You could go a mile or so in a jeep and they had a movie theater after a while there, and a bowling alley. NSA hospital was close by and we had volleyball and just all kinds of little things that made life much more pleasant.

We had some good little shows--entertainment that came in every once in a while. We got to see Martha Rae. I introduced myself to her. She was very interested and very personable. Some weren't, but she was. She asked good questions like, "What can you do here? Do you need anything? Who can I talk to at home to send you things?" And you could tell that she was sincere. We got to see Bob Hope, and he had Racquel Welch with him.

One night just before the Tet Offensive, right around the time when I was getting ready to leave the end of January '68, they said, "Did you hear about the sniper last night?" No. Well, a lone sniper had tried to attack the big hospital at Da Nang. This was called "NSA, Naval Support Activity. This guy had gotten behind one of the tombstones in a local cemetery and was taking pot shots at anybody who walked out the door. I don't think he hit anybody, but the military just went bananas when there was anything like that was going on. They called "Puff the Magic Dragon." Puff the Magic Dragon was a great big . . .

It was a C-47.

No, it was a chopper. We called it Puff, and it had the gatling gun in it. It was the "Jolly Green Giant" if it didn't have the gun. The reason we called it the Dragon was because the rounds were tracers, long red tracers that would come out. It was potent. So, there was Puff flying around shooting. And then they called in mortars. And then they called the .50 caliber machine gun units and they got a piece of the action. The guy got away.

After all that?

And to me that was just typical of what was going on there.

Well, that's probably no more ridiculous than the ice cream.

That's right, that's right. That's the same thing. One day I was in my hooch and they said, "Hey, doc, they're bringing a guy in on a jeep." A jeep, that's different. This kid had passed out at the PX. He was maybe 19. He walked out of the PX and just passed out. And he had regained consciousness by the time they got him to our hospital. I was the first one to get to him. He was very red in the face and he said, "Doc, I can't breath." I said, "Oh, man, what's going on here?" His vital signs were not good. He had a very low blood pressure and poor circulation. We couldn't get very good pulses.

Anyway, all he could say besides saying he wasn't able to breathe was that his stomach hurt terribly. And so we got the surgeons there and opened him up as soon as we could. All I could find when they got him opened was that his liver was pretty swollen. And that was it. He died within minutes after surgery started.

We rushed him to NSA to get an autopsy. And it wasn't maybe a day or so later when I got a call from the doctor at NSA saying, "This is one of the most interesting things we've seen since we've been over here. In fact, we're sending you a photograph of his heart." I got this photograph of the guy's heart. He had a great big endocardiac tumor that had been growing there for years probably. But certainly when he was at the PX it was so big and it was kind of . . it flopped around. It had a base, like a stalk. It wasn't just a big wide tumor. It was long like an eel shape. Anyway, it flopped over into his air flow tract to his lungs. So, his blood was just backing up. His heart couldn't pump any more blood. So, he was just missed. He was bound to have some kind of a murmur we would have thought, but it was missed and he got in, and that's what killed him.

I saw a few women--civilians with what we called "mole pregnancies" and I later found out when I got back into the states and got into GYN training that that's very common with orientals. Just a faulty pregnancy.

What did you call it, mole?

We called it, "mole, m-o-l-e" which is short for molar, m-o-l-a-r, which means the formation of little sacs. In other words, the egg would get fertilized, but the egg was no good. And it would develop a little ways but just form a lot of little sacs, and then the woman would abort that. Or she would start bleeding and you'd have to abort it for her. It was false pregnancy.

Anyway, every once and a while they had to rush one of those in. We were "marine" doctors; we didn't really know what to do with them. That's just one of the things I remember coming in.

One night a couple of Marines who worked at the little hospital sneaked off to the whore house. They didn't realize that there was a mine field all around the hospital. So, they got to the whore house, but coming back one of them stepped on one of the mines. It blew one of them to hell and back. I don't think he was living when he got to the hospital. The other one was screaming and we couldn't get him to shut up. We looked and looked and looked and couldn't find even a scratch. He said, "Doc, I'm going to die." And sure enough he did. And I don't know if an autopsy was done on that kid or not, but what I do know is that he died and I couldn't find a wound on him. And so, when they say when people can die of fright, I agree with that.

Toward the end of my time we started to get a lot of doctors in.

This was the hospital at Da Nang?

Right, I was still there. I was in my last few months. We had a lot of doctors, had a lot of officers, surgeons. I think they would just come through the little hospital there at the end of their tour of duty awaiting transportation home. Anyway, I remember one was a commander. We didn't see many of those. We were either lieutenants or lieutenant commanders. This was a commander, a surgeon. I think he was just waiting for his ride home. He didn't do much because there wasn't much for him to do. He would help if they asked him to. They would consult him on a few things. Anyway, I remember one time they came in and the cry was that this was a ROK with a live round under his skin. This commander jumped up and raced in there.

What they would do is with the live rounders they would stack sandbags around the patient and the surgeon would put on his flak jacket and his helmet, lean over the sandbags, and remove that round.

It was an automatic silver star, so that's why he did that. I remember that case specifically, because that's one of the few times I saw a commander in the operating room.

What was the round?

It was a I want to say a .50 caliber. It was a live round and he was crawling toward the fire and it hit him right under the chin and dissected in his skin about the middle of his breast bone and stopped. So, it was between his skin and his breastbone, but it hadn't gone off. That's the way I remember it. Those were the most common live rounders that I heard about.

I can remember helping in surgery sometimes. During the Tet Offensive, we would all put on our flak jackets and helmets. Here we were just standing around in surgery now with all of this gear on; it was kind of wild. And sometimes you'd look around and see a corpsman just going around the operating room with a fly swatter killing flies.

With a fly swatter killing flies?

Just another incongruity there. The Tet Offensive had just started. We had heard about what they called "satchel charges," and we were scared to death of them. We were surrounded, or so we heard, and we just hoped we could hold them off. We didn't know if they were going to break through and throw a satchel charge in our little hooch or not, but we were all talking about it.

When it started, they put the alert on. They said, "Let's get ready, here they go they're coming." With the alert, the choppers weren't allowed to use their lights. I thought that was another stupidity. And sure enough, one of the anesthesiologists in the little hooch said, "Hey, look at this rocket out here!" and about 100 yards from our hooch this rocket came down. The next morning we found out it wasn't a rocket. It was a chopper with its lights out that had just run into the chopper above him while he was ascending and sheered his props off. So, they were all killed. I remember looking at those bodies. You know the Cabbage Patch Dolls, the faces? Well, that's what they looked like. Something like that. And every bone in their body was broken. And they still had a shocked expression on their faces.

But the accident happened because they had no lights?

Yes. They ran into another chopper. But it only brought them down, it didn't bring the other one down. But here are all these choppers flying every which way and they couldn't see each other. What kind of sense was that?

That was right at the end, and one of my duties was to pronounce the dead dead. I would go to a great, big corrugated iron building without any windows, but they tried to keep it as cool as they could. They had a little compressor in there. And they'd just put the bodies in there. I remember walking in there one day. There was this good-looking, blonde headed Marine. One arm was gone. The chest cavity had been emptied, but his faced was untouched and that was another memory that I've never shaken. When I think of the Marines telling me I'd get use to it I think of that. I think of him.

So, the Tet Offensive had started and my time was up. We called it being, "short time" when you got within a month of your going home time. It was right in the middle of it. In fact, rockets started coming over the air base--over our hospital and we could see the enemy rockets.

They would either strike the air base or go on the other side or sometimes they would detonate in the air. Anyway, that morning I was to leave I didn't even know if we were going to get to leave. They said, "Yes, we're going to try, here are your flak jackets, put them on, put your helmets on and here's a rifle." We never had rifles. We had our .45s. So, here we were completely geared out and they had put as many of us as they could in a jeep and they rushed to the airport.

I was brought to Vietnam on a C-130. But now, going out, the government had a contract with Pan Am. It was just a regular civilian jet. But anyway, the Pan Am would screech onto the Da Nang air base. Here were rockets going overhead and the Marines coming in country ran off. We took our jackets, helmets, and rifles and threw them down and ran on the plane. It was like a hot-rod driver revving his motor. As soon as we closed the door somebody would holler "okay" and that pilot took off. Here we had these young women stewardesses just like back in the states and they were at war here with us. We screeched off. They didn't even refuel there. They waited until we got to Okinawa. When we all got off that plane we kissed the ground.

You'd been through some kind of hell in that time.

And that's it. That's what I have written down here.

That was your memory of Vietnam.

Yes.

You were there for a year?

Yes. And they were very accurate with their time. They tried like hell to get you out right on the day you were supposed to go back. They tried to have you in country for 365 days..

What kind of a readjustment did you have after seeing all of that stuff? Did you ever get readjusted after all that?

It was strange. I had an old girlfriend and she had written me and invited me to some big function in Mobile, Alabama, where she lived. As soon as I got back I went up there and was in kind of a big dance with her. I was just very excited, very happy just to be back. I remember feeling that maybe this was my reward. I get this beautiful girl and things are just great. It took me a while to come down off of that high. It didn't work out with her, as a matter of fact. But then I'd see on TV actual film of fighting going on in Saigon, which we never even got close to. But I said, "Isn't this something! They've got TV coverage of actual fighting going on.

There weren't any brass bands. It was a long time before I really realized that things were breaking down over there. I knew guys were getting caught for trying to shoot their lieutenants or throwing grenades in their colonels' tents. I heard about that, but I didn't see that firsthand. I knew the discipline was breaking down. I felt like it was wrong when I got back after awhile.

I hated Jane Fonda, hated Martin Luther King, for awhile. I still have my problems with Jane Fonda. But I drastically reversed my feelings about what Dr. King was doing. It took a long time.

Have you had problems since? I mean psychological?

I did have problems for a while, especially with nightmares. I'd wake up in a sweat. Like seeing the kid, I still see him sometimes with the head and the chest, and the kid with the

extremities blown off. But, you know, time heals. No, I don't have any long-term. . . I say I don't, but I'm in counseling right now. Maybe I do have something.

I don't know how you possibly go through a situation like you went through and not have some kind of after effects?

Well, I'm just one of tens of thousands you know?

I've talked to World War II veterans who are still having problems. Some of these guys are in their eighties and they still have nightmares about stuff that they saw back in the 1940s. So, it's not abnormal to think that whatever is up in your brain is kind of like a hard drive of a computer; it's still there, somewhere.

Yes, yes and maybe that's good. . .that there is some kind of a bad . . . it should be. War should have a bad effect on you.

Yes, that's a good way of putting it, I guess. Thank you for sharing those memories with me.

You're welcome. In fact, you have been the impetus for me to start writing a lot of this stuff down. I started doing that. I'm spending an hour a day writing things down.